

# **The Origin and Principles of the Christians**

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**By**  
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**Rev. Martyn Summerbell**

## THE ORIGIN AND PRINCIPLES OF THE CHRISTIANS

The pleasant duty falls to my lot on this occasion to speak on the Origin and Principles of the Christians. By "the Christians," for the purpose of this discourse, is meant that religious denomination which sprang into existence at the end of the Eighteenth, and the beginning of the Nineteenth Centuries, and to which this local church—the Christian Church of the Evangel—belongs, and in whose fellowship its work is carried forward.

For this denomination, the Christians, it may be briefly said that it has been in existence a little over a century; that it numbers now something more than a hundred thousand communicants, some making it a hundred and forty thousand; that it has some twelve hundred ministers and fifteen hundred churches; that it owns and administers some ten colleges in as many States of the Union; that it carries on an extensive mission work in Japan, and an infant mission in Porto Rico; that it has a theological seminary in Ohio and a successful publishing house in the same State; and that its denominational organ is **THE HERALD OF GOSPEL LIBERTY**, which it publishes weekly, and which enjoys the distinction of being the oldest regular religious weekly in continuous publication in the

world. It might be possible to take another step and claim for this religious paper, the oldest of all, that it is also the best; and there are some who are saying that very thing. But we are a modest folk, and we recognize that there are a number of very excellent religious publications issuing from the several denominational presses, and accordingly, and to avoid any appearance of invidious comparison, we will simply say of our oldest religious paper that it is among the best that are published, and that it is positively the best of all for us.

How came this denomination—the Christians—to exist; for what does it particularly stand, and what does it purpose to accomplish? These are the questions before us for consideration.

Now there is a sense in which we might think of the Christians as constituting the American National Church. I am saying that we might *think* of it in that manner, though it would be hardly courteous to others to speak of it so; at least very strenuously. I am saying that among ourselves we may think of our denomination as meeting the conditions of the National Church of America. For it came into being in the period when our nation was taking on its present national form; the impulses which led to its formation were similar in the religious field to those in the political field which led our fathers to cast off the yoke of kings: it was indigenous to America, for

unlike so many of the denominations about us it was not imported from over the sea, and never paid a cent of duty for admission to these shores, but, on the contrary, it grew and developed from our native soil. And more than all that it is the only denomination now in the public eye which can ever hope to become completely national in character, for it offers the only creed, the Holy Bible, which all Christians can accept; and Jesus, the only Head of the Church, whom all Christians can accept; and the name Christian, the only name which all Christians everywhere can accept. In these several particulars the Christians are unique. All that they require of a man, who presents himself for fellowship in one of their churches, can be agreed to by any member of any truly Christian denomination; for they ask only what the Bible requires, and no more; just what every real Christian in any denomination believes, and no more; just what God asks of a man to permit him to enter heaven—just that and no more.

When that day comes, and come it will, as certainly as that the sun continues to rise and the world to move forward and upward; when denominational rancors and jealousies shall cease; when all Christians shall turn from trying to surpass one another to real fighting against sin and evil; when all Christian forces shall stand marshalled shoulder to shoulder for the promotion of righteousness and the spiritual life in Jesus, as de-

nomination after denomination wheels into line to take its place in that magnificent Christian host under the standard of our Prince Immanuel, the principles on which they will come together, and the name under which they all will serve, will be the very same as those which our Christian churches have advocated and proclaimed all these years. Every day the churches generally are approaching this position. Every day they are deploring the evils of division. Every day they are planning new enterprises in which all who love the Lord can work together. And when they reach the point that they really wish to stand side by side, there will be this difference between the Christians and the others, that they all will have to surrender something or other to enlist in the united army; while the Christians will have to surrender nothing, for they have been camped on this Union Ground from their earliest beginning.

But it is time for us to consider that beginning. The close of the Eighteenth Century, as is well known to every student of affairs, was marked by a great upheaval of the human mind. It was a period of breaking up long-standing abuses, of the application of great principles to conduct both in the individual, and in the social mass. French philosophers had preached infidelity and the rights of man till they brought about the overthrow of their monarchy; the apparition of the red spectre of

the guillotine and the elevation to **Empire** of the First Napoleon.

Something in the same ferment which effected such changes on the map, and in the social conditions of Europe, was stirring in the American Colonies. Liberty was a watchword in all our Colonial Assemblies. Every North American freeholder resented the encroachments of the British crown, and when the king's ministers would not give way, America exclaimed, "Away with kings!"

But when men stand in peril of the sword to assert their civil rights, they will soon probably be taking account of the rights and duties in civil relations. Many of the colonists had given much attention to the problems of state, and they began to think that some of the principles under which they had attained civil liberty could well apply to greater liberty in their service to God. This was all the more true since America had been thinking intently on matters of religion. Wesley and Whitefield, in both England and America, had kindled a flame, which resulted in a renewal of practical piety and the reform of men in their daily living. You may remember that it was in 1766 that the First Methodist Society was constituted in New York City, and that it was in 1770 when Whitefield preached through New England like a forest flame. From this time forward to the end of the century and beyond, all through the Revolu-

tionary War, and during that after time, while Jefferson and Hamilton were framing the Constitution under which we live; and all that while new settlers were pushing over the Alleghanies and down the Ohio, there was a wonderful searching of the hearts of men. Rights and duties were warring against privilege and pleasure, and all the old traditions that had been holding souls in bondage were crumbling, both at the throne and the altar. The whole tenor of the time, when you come to observe it, was that of formation and reformation. If there was revolt against a king, there was also revolt against overmuch lordship in religious assemblies. As has been well said many times since, these men felt that nothing esteemed settled was really settled until it was settled right. When you draw this picture of the close of the Eighteenth Century; when you see the common man packing his saddle bags and mounting his horse to ride to Boston, or Charleston, or Richmond to sit in the hall of legislation; when you see all over the land the traveling preacher holding his services in a farmer's kitchen, or expounding the Word to expectant hundreds from a platform of slabs in the shade of the forest; when you see whole families in city, or hamlet, or wilderness, from Salem, in New England, down south to Savannah, in Georgia, bending at the home altar in the fervor of their devotion to God, you may begin to feel the atmos-



phere, and to secure some realization of the conditions in which the denomination called Christians came to be so strangely born.

For the first we will turn toward the Methodist communities in the South. You may remember that the first General Conference of the Methodists was held in Baltimore in 1784. Another was held in the same city eight years later, in 1792, at which it was proposed to episcopalize the church, and elect Francis Asbury a bishop. But America was not partial to bishops. In the popular mind they were associated with the monarchical principle, which America had discarded in the state, and all the bishops it had known were known to be friendly to the king, and unfriendly to the new Republic. So far, Methodism had gotten on well without bishops, and a number of the preachers did not take at all to the proposition for the new order. The leader of the opposition was James O'Kelly, a man of great ability and force of character. It was commonly known that John Wesley himself was against the making of bishops, and that he had written a letter to Brother Francis Asbury in which he pungently said, "Call me a thief, scoundrel, or anything else, but for the cause's sake, call me not Bishop!"

Another measure before the conference was the adoption of a series of Rules of Government, drawn up by Francis Asbury, and these O'Kelly did not approve of at all.

He claimed that the Bible was the best Rule that could be made, and that the formation of any other would result in oppression of the brethren. In the course of the debate he held up a New Testament in the sight of the conference, and exclaimed, "Put away all other books and forms, and let this be the only criterion, and that will satisfy me!"

But the conference, under the lead of Francis Asbury, was bent on its course. It proceeded to elect Asbury to the bishopric, and it voted approval to the Rules which O'Kelly and his supporters had opposed, and in consequence James O'Kelly, Rice Haggard, and some fifteen or twenty others withdrew, and their churches went with them. The new body which they constituted early in 1793 took for its name that of Republican Methodists, in allusion to the fact that its government was vested in the membership, and not in a bishop. But the next year it was recognized that the title of the body did not consort with Mr. O'Kelly's claim of having all things in the church governed by the New Testament, and so the title, Republican Methodist, was dropped in favor of the Bible name, Christian. At that time, in 1794, there were in Virginia and North Carolina about a thousand members in the churches of the new body, and about twenty churches and ministers.

From the South we may now glance westward to that "dark and bloody ground" of

Kentucky, which had been wrested from the savage tribes at untold cost of privation and peril. Here, in the year 1800, was found a devoted band of young ministers of the Presbyterian faith. They were zealous in the Master's service and preached the Gospel with great power. One of their number, Barton W. Stone, was pastor at Cane Ridge. He had started a revival close by his chapel at Cane Ridge, and this meeting grew into a great camp-meeting, which lasted a year, and at which converts professed religion by the hundreds and thousands. After a time there rose the question as to what church these converts should join. But they knew nothing of this church or that. They had surrendered to Christ and His Gospel, and had been living in that profession, and it seemed to them enough. Asked of what sect they were, they answered, "None." What denomination would they join? "None." What denominational name would they prefer? And again they said, "None." How, then, would they live? And to that they said, "We will continue to live as we have begun: we will be Christians." And the young Presbyterian ministers under whom they had begun the religious life cast in their lot with them and became simply Christians. Their names were well worthy of our remembrance. They are Barton W. Stone, John Dunlavy, John Thompson, Robert Marshall, and David Purviance. Their faith was as pure as the Gospel, and as

all-embracing as the whole Church of Christ.

And now we may go to the hillsides of historic New England. There the cradle of liberty had been rocked, and religious liberty was to have a new awakening.

In the year of 1796, Abner Jones, a young physician, settled in Lyndon, Vt., where he became successful in his calling. But he was a profoundly religious man, and he felt that God had called him to preach. He was a member of the Baptist church. But the more he read his New Testament, the more he disagreed with the sentiments which then prevailed among the Baptists. He held the conviction that the whole Church of Christ was greater than any branch of it, and, beside, he could not find any church in the Bible that was called Baptist. The Bible tells about John the Baptist, but he was not a church, and he never established a church. Hear Mr. Jones on this subject: "I drew up a determination to believe and practice just what I find required in the Bible, and no more."

When he realized that there was no Baptist church mentioned in the Bible, and that the disciples were first called Christians at Antioch, he ceased to call himself a Baptist, and was known simply as a Christian. He was ordained to the ministry by the Free Baptists, and organized the First Christian Church in New England, in Lyndon, Vt., in 1802. From this point he traveled far and wide preaching the gospel and found-

ing churches. In Massachusetts he came into touch with Daniel Hix and Elias Smith, both Baptist ministers, but who now joined with him in the broader field. They, and those who heard them, gladly united on the Bible as a sufficient creed for Christians; on Christian as a sufficient name, and on Christian character as the sufficient test of fellowship.

Thus we observe, in the good Providence of God, in three widely-separated portions of the country, South, West, and East, and from three different denominations, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Baptist, these brethren, faithful preachers all, all having a vision of Christ's Church as larger than any denomination in existence, and broader than what the broadest creed in existence could cover, all reaching practically the same belief, and all standing practically on the same platform, and without any previous knowledge of each other. It was some years before they ever heard of the existence of the others at all. But, in 1808, when Elias Smith, in Portsmouth, N. H., published *THE HERALD OF GOSPEL LIBERTY*, by help of its columns they came into acquaintance, and at once joined forces in one body.

It has been said sometimes that the Christian Church was born in a revival. This was true of the Mother Church in Jerusalem, which gathered its three thousand converts after Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost, the first public effort of the new church.

And, as we have seen, these early Christian churches in the South, West, and East, were all born in revivals. Their ministers were pioneers. They felt called to preach in the waste places. They went out, often two by two, after the manner of the Master's disciples, and journeyed from State to State, and from town to town. Often they held services every day in the week and twice, or three times, on the Sabbath. And wherever they went they preached the gospel; and because they preached just that, men were converted, and churches were established. They knew no master but Christ, and all whom they received into the church they taught to be Christians. They were practicing Christian union, and they offered the only ground on which Christian union can be accomplished, and so were blazing the path for succeeding generations to follow. There is a hymn which they used to sing in their early days—one whose poetic fire may not be brilliant, but which indicates their spirit. It began with this stanza:

“More than ten years have rolled away.  
Since I did testify and say,  
    Aside all party names I'll lay,  
And make the name of Christ my stay,  
    And join in Christian union.”

The stress laid upon the joy of, and the obligation for Christian union, as shown by this stanza, was characteristic of the Christians from the rise of their government.

One of their favorite texts was that expression of our Lord, in John, where He prays that His disciples may be one, "so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me." It was their constant claim that denominational divisions were the bane of the Church; that the creeds of the churches were provocative of division, and so were worse than needless, and, in fact, were positively mischievous; that the apostolic churches flourished when they had no creed at all, other than the simple belief in Jesus as the Son of God, and that the more closely the Church of the day models itself after the pattern of the apostolic Church, the more readily will the world listen to its plea, and the more triumphant will be its progress.

How some of the Christian ministers have spoken on Christian union I will show from their own words. Matthew Gardner was a prominent minister of southern Ohio, and an associate for many years of Barton W. Stone, of Kentucky. He relates his attendance at the Kentucky Conference, in 1815, and says, "The object of the Christian ministers then seemed to be to travel and preach Christian union, upon the Bible, as the only rule of faith, and to induce all denominations to unite in one brotherhood." *Autobiography*, p. 33.

Dr. Austin Craig, who was the first President of the Theological Seminary of the Christians, says of their position: "If any

man gives us evidence that he has the Spirit of Christ, we do not trouble ourselves—at any rate we do not trouble him—about his theological opinions. He may be Trinitarian or Unitarian, Calvinist, Arminian, or Universalist; yet, if he has the Spirit of Christ, that is all that we require in order to our fellowship. This, as I have always supposed, is the position of the Christian Connexion.” Life, p. 300.

Dr. Henry Y. Rush, who was for ten years the editor of the denominational paper, speaks thus of the Christian position: “I shall stand to the end upon the platform of our fathers as to Christian character being the only test of fellowship and denominational co-operation. I could find in no other pale a nobler brotherhood or more helpful fellowship. The trend of our fairly and ably-edited paper, and of its correspondence is all in the line of less tenacity for what Gallio termed ‘words and names,’ and for what Paul preached and died—the union of Jew and Gentile into one faith and fellowship—and this in a Person, and not in a title—in charity, in love, and not in form and show that are as tinkling cymbals.” Life, p. 275.

I offer one more testimony to the hundreds that are available, and that from the pen of Dr. N. Summerbell, than whom no man was better qualified to speak for the denomination. He says of the Christians: “They receive Christ as their only leader,



Christian as their only name, the Bible as their only creed, and all Christians as their brethren. Their principles are in harmony with the Church as Christ founded it, and the embodiment of those principles is the only means by which all Christians can come together as one body in Christ in Christian union." Life, p. 307.

From what has been so far said it may be considered that the Christians are a peculiar people; peculiar in managing to exist for over a century without a written creed, when everybody else maintained that it was impossible to hold a church together without a creed, and the longer and stiffer it was, so much the better; peculiar in that they rejected any distinctively denominational name, but everybody else was taking special pride in his own denominational name; peculiar in welcoming to their fellowship men of the most adverse theological opinions, when everybody else regarded unanimity of opinion as positively essential to the existence of a church; peculiar in being as ready to attend the services of another denomination, as those of their own, when their own was not available; peculiar in listening attentively to the minister of any denomination, because they recognized him as a brother, and not as a foeman. In other words, the Christians have been peculiar in cultivating the traits that are common to all Christians, and in discouraging the traits that would divide them from

the others; by which in the final analysis you will easily perceive that they are peculiar only in not being peculiar at all. For in their preaching and teaching they hold to, and impress the great fundamental truths, which, as Augustine so well put it, are believed "by all, always, and everywhere." There are themes enough of that kind, and ways enough of teaching them, to keep any minister busy all the days of his life. There is enough to say about God and Christ and Heaven; about man's duty to God, and the Church, and his fellow-men; about his soul culture and his eternal destiny to fill every Sunday in the year, and without saying a single word to which any real Christian can take honest exception. Sermons can be built on these, and kindred themes, that the Methodist can approve, that the Baptist can approve, that the Episcopalian can approve, that all Christians can approve, and that each and all of them might imagine had been written for his own denomination. And this is possible, for it is only the non-essentials which divide men and set them apart from each other; while it is the function of the fundamentals to unite them, and inspire them to work collectively for the promotion of the gospel.

As a rule, the instruction of our Christian ministers has been everywhere acceptable. Members of all denominations quickly find themselves at home in their congregations.

When our ministers have preached occasionally in the pulpit of some other denomination, it has been seldom that they have failed of receiving a sympathetic hearing. Time and again after such a service our ministers have been assured that no one would have imagined them as coming from another denomination, if not so advised. And this result occurred, not because they had twisted their sermons to suit the occasion, but simply and only because the truth they presented was fundamental truth, the basic truth of the gospel, the truths that held everywhere, and that will prove true to all eternity.

And I can freely say that I believe in that kind of preaching. I may go further and say that that is the kind of preaching that is coming more and more to be heard in the pulpits of all denominations.

We are to-day on the eve of a vast forward movement, under the auspices of the laymen of the churches, to promote evangelism. Manhood is to be enlisted, as never before since the days of the apostles, to awaken boys and men to the joys and glory of the Christian faith. In this movement there will be a concerted neglect of the questions that men quarrel about; a concerted neglect of the questions that create confusion and strife, and strong emphasis will be laid upon the sublime truths of the gospel. This teaching will follow closely the lines of the Christian ministers who

went into the wilderness, two by two, a century ago. And, believe me, this laymen's movement, if it follows those lines, will meet with the like successful results.

There is one binding element in this world, which breaks down partition walls, which overcomes selfish partisanship, which melts all hearts into a common purpose; and that is the Spirit of Jesus. This Spirit is roused by the preaching of the gospel—the simple gospel of Jesus.

Whenever Mr. Moody, or Mr. Chapman, or any of the great evangelists of recent years, have held their meetings, they have insisted that all the Christians of any town to which they have come should unite together, and work together as one for the salvation of men. Mr. Moody and the others, on such occasions, preached the gospel; the plain truths and promises of the New Testament, and kept quite clear from any man's fads or fancies. All the denominational shibboleths and differences which divide the Church were not alluded to, and those truths were proclaimed which all Christians agree on, and that all sinners in their hearts believe, no matter how much they try to forget them. And whenever meetings are conducted in this manner, sinners are converted, backsliders are reclaimed, and the whole church rejoices. It is only when the churches drop back from that high ground, and begin to press their particular claims aggressively and selfishly, that coldness and

apathy creep in to drive out Christian fervor and love.

We, the Christians, believe in having that Christian atmosphere all the time. For ourselves, we are determined to cherish nothing that tends to chill the spirit of Christian love. If differences of form, or of belief, separate other Christians from others, they are nothing to us. We do not care for such differences; we do not even see them. Deeper than the form, past the dogma, we look for the faith and the life. Wherever we meet a Christian, be he Baptist, Methodist, Episcopalian, or Quaker—so long as he is Christ's man—we suffer not his denominational peculiarities to part him from our affection, but gladly recognize him as a brother in Christ. When he comes to one of our Christian churches, so long as he believes the Bible and lives as a Christian, that is all we want to know; we receive him as a brother. And we welcome to our pulpits the minister of any Christian body, not because he is a member of that body, but simply because he is a Christian. And when he preaches to us we listen; but we are always most pleased when he preaches those fundamental truths, which all of us believe, and which are sure to make good Christians, and to make good Christians better Christians.

And, my brother, when all the preachers get to doing just that; when they get to preaching the fundamental truths of the

gospel, there will not be any timber left for building up partitions between Christians; and the world will be increasingly converted, and the Church will sing her pean of triumph, and move forward for the conquest of all the world for Christ.

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